

The Israel-PLO War 1982

by Howard Adelman

Operation Peace in the Galilee and the Beirut siege constitute the first war Israel has fought against the PLO. The Yom Kippur War, the Six Day War, the 1956 Suez War and even the War of Independence were fought against Arab states. This does not mean that the PLO did not participate in previous battles, but only that the principal military forces were those of Arab states not identified as PLO. Nor does it mean that this war was fought exclusively against the PLO; we are all aware of the battles fought with the Syrians in the Bekaa Valley, the reported 80 Syrian jets destroyed versus one Israeli jet lost, and the capture of the Beirut-Damascus highway from the Syrians, cutting off the supply lines of the PLO (and Syrians) in west Beirut. But in the public mind — and in reality — the war was fought against the military forces of the PLO. Israel fought and won a war against a "nation" which does not have a state.

The war was unique in a number of other respects. This was the first war in which Israel's military objective was not simply the defeat of its enemy in battle. The goal was much

larger — the destruction of the enemy's capacity to fight. This military aim did not apply to the Syrians however; for them Israel sought the withdrawal of their military presence from Lebanon. But the ousting of the Syrians was not undertaken by military means, at least until now. In any case it is clear that Israel's objective with respect to the Syrians is not the destruction of their military capability. That goal is confined to the PLO operation, and notwithstanding this limitation, it still constitutes a tall order.

To accomplish the destruction of an enemy's military capability, the military might of the enemy must be so shattered, its alliances with its suppliers and supporters must be severed, internal cohesiveness and morale must be broken, so that the idea of rebuilding or recreating a military force capable of attacking Israel is universally perceived to be one of Don Quixote's impossible dreams. These tasks are all extremely difficult endeavours, yet they are nevertheless insufficient in themselves to destroy an enemy's capacity to fight. For the enemy must not only be thoroughly defeated and routed in the field, but the field must be eliminated on which the enemy can wage a military battle. The Romans did this to the Jews in the Bar Kochba rebellion in 132 A.D.; Israel's capacity to fight was destroyed for almost 2,000 years.

The political objectives of the war were also different, for not only was the war intended to destroy the military capacity of the PLO, it was also designed to liquidate the PLO's infrastructure in Lebanon. The PLO was to be eliminated as a political

force in Lebanese politics.

Palestinians arrived in Lebanon as refugees of the 1948 war. Later a small number of Palestinian refugees came after the 1967 war. A much larger number of militants arrived following King Hussein's suppression of the PLO in Jordan during Black September in 1970, after 20,000 of their number had been killed. By 1975 they had become an economic and social force in Lebanese politics. In the civil war of 1975-76 they established themselves as the most potent military force among all the feuding factions in Lebanon. From despised refugees, the PLO had become the effective rulers of significant sectors of the Lebanese mosaic. And from that base their economic and social infrastructure grew exponentially. Never before had the Israelis waged war to eliminate the political infrastructure of their enemy even from territory which they captured and some hoped to annex. And Lebanon was a territory over which they had no claims whatsoever.

The war had a second unique political aim. This was the first time Israel set as its objective the determination of the political character of an adjacent political state — the establishment of a strong central government in Beirut. Previous wars had been fought as clear exercises in self-defence when Israel was attacked or as pre-emptive battles to prevent Israel from being attacked. They were defensive military wars in which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was clearly that, a citizen army of defense. Although a case can be made for Operation Galilee as a defensive war, (Israel's life was not at stake, but the



Howard Adelman is Director of the Graduate Program in Philosophy at York University and Director of the Refugee Documentation Project, York University.

peace and quiet and morale of its northern settlements in Israel were), the Beirut siege could not be said to be self-defensive. The PLO presence in Beirut could pose no significant immediate military threat to Israel. The destruction of the PLO in Beirut was required to meet a larger military objective, i.e. the destruction of the PLO's capacity to fight, as well as a political objective involving the establishment of a strong central Lebanese government which required the elimination of the PLO infrastructure. Clearly, these are not objectives of an underdog. They are the goals of a state which is well established as a regional power, willing to use the military as an alternative means of practicing politics.

If the objectives differed from previous wars, the context did as well. This is generally acknowledged as the first Israeli war fought without a national consensus of support. No doubt a majority — perhaps even a large one — backed Begin's war. In fact, the support for Operation Galilee could be said to be overwhelming. But even that fell far short of the traditional consensus. More importantly, the Labour Party objected to the invasion of West Beirut, which Begin was clearly committed to undertake if diplomacy failed to rout the PLO. One of Israel's youngest and most distinguished military commanders resigned from the armed services rather than be faced with refusing a command to lead his troops into Beirut, an unprecedented move. Rallies of close to 100,000 opposing the war took place in Tel-Aviv, while Israeli soldiers were dying in the field.

While Israelis were far from united in supporting the war, world opinion was almost uniform in vilifying Israel's conduct of the war. The calumnies were bad enough — 700,000 refugees produced by the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon and 40,000 civilian casualties when, in fact, there were less than 50,000 homeless Palestinians and Lebanese resulting from the initial operation and less than 4,000 casualties according to the official account of the municipal authorities. Yet at least two rabbis, I.F. Stone, Stude Terkel, and numerous other celebrities allowed their names to be put under a protesting advertisement. (No sub-

sequent correction appeared to my knowledge.) And what is worse than the lies — for that is what such gross distortion of fact must be labelled — is the fact that they were widely believed. Large numbers of North Americans and Europeans were prepared to believe the worst libels about Israel while, at the same time, Palestinians in south Lebanon, who were available for interviews and whom I later indeed did interview, acknowledged that through the war they had learned the realities about the Israelis. They were neither monsters, on the one hand, as they had been led to believe, nor supermen on the other hand, as they feared. Rather, they were a sloppily dressed if effective military force, who by and large acted to avoid civilian casualties in Operation Galilee. In spite of these facts, which did not even need to be verified to be doubted since all of south Lebanon contained less than 700,000 inhabitants, large numbers of individuals were prepared to cast Israel beyond the pale of civilization just as they were once ready to believe blood libels against Jews in Eastern Europe. What shocked Israelis is not that such lies were told, but that they were believed. And the rhetoric used against Israel included charges of "extermination", a "final solution", "genocide" — the language of the holocaust now thrust at Jews themselves.

When the evidence was clearly available for everyone to know the truth, it was largely ignored, as attention shifted to Beirut. Israel was depicted as wantonly slaughtering civilians, hitting schools and bombing hospitals. It may be that while I was in Lebanon and Beirut, some articles did appear in newspapers and magazines accusing the PLO of holding civilians as hostages to save some remnant of their power and prestige. But the "moral" outrage seemed to be overwhelmingly and uniformly directed at Israel.

All this happened while American policy was never more clearly congruent with Israeli political and military goals, though diverging on tactics. One reason for the lack of Israeli consensus supporting the war and overwhelming outrage aimed at Israel was yet another unique characteristic of this war. For the conduct of the war was also radically different, as were the objectives and the context.

This was Israel's first urban war. It is true that in previous wars, Port Suez in Egypt and Kuneitra in Syria had been levelled. But this was the first war in which the primary targets were the PLO military installations ensconced in the urban landscapes of Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut. The targets were cities and the ultimate target was a capital city. Civilian casualties were regrettable, yes, but an inevitable consequence of such a war, however hard one tried to avoid them. Traditional Israeli compassion which had made the Israelis the highest contributors per capita to the plight of Cambodians following the Vietnamese invasion of that hapless country, that truly deep-felt sympathy for all loss of human life was, in this war, subsumed under military and political objectives of a radically different order.

The first days of the war produced a hero, Yekutieli (Kuti) Adam, who led the capture of Beaufort Castle. As a member of Shelli, (the Israeli party opposed to all aspects of the war), he was the highest ranking officer to die in the war and the only one perceived as a true war hero. Every other Israeli war produced a galaxy of heroes. An Israeli soldier stated his feelings most revealingly on an Israeli Friday evening TV broadcast — 'in this war we don't feel like heroes'; and this, in spite of the fact that many Israelis died trying to avoid killing civilians. Branded on Western media as civilian killers with pictures of injured and maimed individuals being rushed into West Beirut hospitals, presumably destroyed by Israeli shells, at the same time dubious of the validity of the extensiveness of the war, and fighting an enemy the destructive character of which clearly posed no real threat to Israel's existence though it threatened Israeli life and property, Israelis could acknowledge the results and even cheer the superior military skill of the Israeli pilots and their brilliantly executed battles against the Syrians, but for many it was difficult to feel heroic. Though the war was fought with political intelligence and exceptional technical skill, this was a war of one of the best equipped and best trained armies against a smaller and divided military force noted for its enormous stores of arms and munitions, signs of conspicuous

consumption and striving for status rather than any evidence of the PLO's ability to use such armaments intelligently and effectively in the vast quantities accumulated.

But the conduct of the war differed in a much more important respect. For the first time in Israel's history, the initiative was in the hands of the military rather than in those of the politicians. It is widely believed that Sharon tricked the hawkish Israeli cabinet into going beyond the original 40 km. goal of the war. On June 8th., Begin clearly assured Israelis that "the fighting will cease after Israel reaches 40 km." But Sharon plunged on to the borders of Beirut, then to the Damascus-Beirut highway, on to the airport and the Palestinian camps in the south of West Beirut, and then to the museum and Hippodrome at the museum checkpoint at the entrance to the Champs Elysee of West Beirut. Though the cabinet probably sanctioned the latter moves in principle, evidence seems to be that even the cabinet and perhaps Begin himself were surprised by the earlier moves on Beirut. And finally, by mid-August, Begin and the cabinet had to publicly rein in Sharon following a sustained bombardment of Beirut.

If the nature of the war differed, if its objectives were so qualitatively at odds with previous wars, if domestic dissent and international public opinion distinguished the context of this war from all other Israeli wars, if the conduct and control of initiatives had shifted to the military, how would all of this be reflected in terms of consequences? Repeatedly, news comments on the war reiterated the refrain that though a complete military victory, the war was politically useless. Israeli commentators did not go so far. They frequently distinguished between the results of Operation Galilee and the siege of Beirut. For example, Abba Eban declared that "the war in Beirut... has not brought Israel a single gain that was not in our hands when the first phase was ended in mid-June." (*Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 6, 1982).

Whether or not one agrees with the siege of Beirut, it did bring consequences that went well beyond the results of Operation Galilee; (whether one considers them gains or not depends on one's perspectives). In the first phase of the war, the

Syrians were severely mauled. In the second they were made politically impotent in Lebanon after the capture of the Beirut-Damascus highway, and the capital was freed from the pressure of the Syrian military presence. More importantly, the PLO was destroyed as a military force. Whether their military potential was also destroyed depends on developments in the West Bank and Gaza, but certainly their capacity to use Lebanon as a military base was eliminated. Operation Galilee began the process; the siege of Beirut finished it.

The PLO as an economic power was also dealt a severe blow. The various factions of the PLO controlled industries, financial institutions, real estate interests, as well as the ports of Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut, dominating them far more effectively than the International Longshoremen's Union ever controlled the east coast ports of the United States. The PLO-directed Sidon steel works (Ma'assase al-Mechanikiya al-Hadith), which monopolized the Lebanese market, has since been expropriated by the Israelis as enemy property. The Arab Bank, more popularly known as the Fatah Bank, has had its human foundations torn away. It is unlikely however, that the extensive real estate interests will be affected unless the new Lebanese government decides to expropriate them. In Aabda, just north of Sidon, where a Lebanese official living in the area told me that 75% of the apartment buildings are owned by Palestinians, it will be hard to distinguish between those owned by PLO and those representing the investments of the hard-earned savings of Palestinians returning from Abu Dhabi or Kuwait.

However, the capitalist powers of the PLO did not compare to its control of labour, evidenced by the fact that the port workers were overwhelmingly Palestinian. Through PLO control of the ports, not only were arms and imports effectively managed, but also duties were levied to put competitors out of business and to give the PLO an economic monopoly in one economic sector after another.

But if the PLO military power was destroyed and PLO economic power was severely damaged, its social power remains largely intact. For the base of the PLO social services is the

UNWRA-funded schools, clinics and welfare services. The PLO not only prevented UNWRA from keeping track of refugees in the camps, but effectively determined the curriculum and staffing of the schools and clinics and how the rations were distributed. As one senior Palestinian UNWRA official said to me in Sidon, "we will carry on and will not deal with the Israelis as long as our leaders are penned up in West Beirut", (where they still were at that time). UNWRA is the American HEW (Health, Education and Welfare Agency) of the Palestinians, but one financed by the international community rather than domestic taxes. The PLO was thereby free to invest the monies from the Arab Gulf States, Iran and Libya into a surfeit of military supplies and reasonably well run if well protected business enterprises.

The war has not only affected the military and economic structures of Palestinian life in Lebanon, it has freed the Lebanese from PLO domination. More importantly, however, it frees Palestinians from PLO control. For those anti-PLO Palestinians, who arrived in Lebanon in 1948 and suffered with repressed rage at the Johnny-come-latelys of 1967 and 1970, were subjected to a force which controlled their lives. As one said to me, he was ready to speak out publicly against the PLO as soon as the Israelis had destroyed — not removed — the militants in Beirut. Why not earlier? He did not want to feel they could sneak back into the region and assassinate him as they had once killed his brother. The PLO exodus from Beirut does allow Palestinian to disagree with Palestinian on the use of force, and does free the Lebanese from PLO control — both of which would never have been possible if Israeli military action had been restricted to 40 km. And Lebanese freedom from PLO control refers not only to the Christians. Two months before the Israeli invasion, the Shiites led by AMAL, turned against their former allies, the PLO. Some Lebanese and Palestinians are willing to sacrifice the last drop of Israeli blood to get rid of the swaggering domination of the PLO.

The psychological effects of the war on the PLO is even more significant. The 1948 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, who almost all came from the villages and cities

which are now part of northern Israel, retained the dream of returning to their village plots and old homes. The PLO military seemed to make the realization of that dream feasible. Israel's complete military victory has now destroyed this illusion. In days ahead, if extensive family visits are permitted between Palestinians in Lebanon and Arab Israelis, even the illusion that this is a desirable goal may disappear. For in the last 25 years, their Palestinian cousins in Israel have become more Israeli, just as they have become more Lebanese.

Many Palestinians in Lebanon already know that they would not want to settle in an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, let alone a partially autonomous one, because they recognize that they would be regarded as outsiders. Citizenship status in Lebanon is thus preferable if it can be attained. They are Lebanese in many of their attitudes and habits and have learned to benefit from the Milton Friedman-world of Lebanese economic life. The potential thus exists for a severe fracturing of the PLO, not on its traditional ideological lines (though that may also happen), but on territorial ones. For, once the goal of eliminating Israel as a state is clearly seen to be unrealizable, then the Lebanese Palestinians can go their own way — provided there is a real way to go — while the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank can truly seek national self-determination in a reasonably clearly defined territory without needing to retain the objective of eliminating Israel. One important consequence then of the Israeli-PLO war of 1982 is the severe damaging of the structural underpinnings of PLO ideology.

There are, of course, significant shifts in the politics of the region. It may be true that on the one hand the PLO resents the Arab states for abandoning them when they were trapped. However, on the other hand, the Arab oil states can now feel free from PLO military blackmail, though perhaps not moral blackmail. The Soviet Union has shown itself to be a paper tiger, while the United States has revealed its character as a toothless lion unable to limit the actions of its ally, Israel. What Israel has lost in prestige as a moral power in international eyes, it has gained in status as a military power in the region. And

in an area which gives obeisance to the man with the gun, this is an important factor.

It remains an open question whether Syrian forces will withdraw entirely from Lebanon or whether Lebanon will be able to form a strong central government. Bashir Gemayel's ordering of a draft for all 18-year old Maronite youth points to a Christian dominated state in Lebanon to parallel the Jewish dominated state of Israel. Even if a plausible future scenario can be drawn from direct consequences of the war, one can at best only speculate about indirect results. The most relevant scenario is the loss of the West Bank and Gaza as part of Israel. In spite of all the enormous gains Begin has made as a result of the war, and in face of the moral superego attacks of the extreme doves and the helpless thrashing about of the moderate ones, Begin may have sown the seeds for the loss of his most cherished ideal — the effective annexation and integration of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and Gaza into Israel.

The reasons are simple. The ideology of the PLO is dominated by those who needed to prove that they could serve all Palestinians by satisfying the dream of return for even those who came from what is now Israel. Now with the shattering of the military forces of the PLO, different groups of Palestinians in different territories are free to pursue their own particular interests. Lebanese Palestinians, who have not yet been able to get Lebanese citizenship can clearly seek that objective. The absolute loyalty of Jordanian Palestinians to Jordan will be less suspect. At the same time, the Gaza and West Bank Arabs can begin to seek their own interests without the debilitating weakness of the claims of the PLO covenant requiring the destruction of Israel.

At the present time, depression is rampant among West Bank and Gaza Arabs. Their helplessness as their brothers in Lebanon were severely beaten is a cause for widespread guilt. They did not even manage to organize any significant strikes or demonstrations to at least express their support, which may have perhaps drawn away some of the military resources of Israel. They are resented by some, and, some resent in turn, the military fiction of

the PLO for leading them down a garden path to a wasteland.

However, they are now in a position, if they are clever about their possibilities and do not continue the self-destructive illusions of their twentieth century history, to develop a position politically stronger than ever before. For along with the destruction of the PLO has also dissolved Israel's argument regarding pressing consideration for her security needs, which, though with decreasing effect, still tended to overshadow the Palestinian demands for self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza.

The combination of the particularization of Palestinian interests with the loss of credibility of the Israeli security argument can become the most powerful of political arguments in the international community and within Israeli public opinion, *if and only if* the means chosen to pursue the goal of self-determination is consistent with real Palestinian interests and a non-threatening stand towards Israel. If the Palestinians on the West Bank show that they are determining their own destinies and are not being led by goals and methods which are counterproductive to their own interests, if they use peaceful means to give witness to this will to self-determination, then in spite of the enormous gains of the Begin and Sharon audacious siege of Beirut, the long term goals of annexation may in fact be lost, as the toothless lion and the paper tiger join together with other members of the international community to increase the pressure to allow real autonomy for West Bank and Gaza Palestinians.

The reduction of the Palestinians to a minority of inferior status within an enlarged Israel is nevertheless also possible. If the Palestinians opt to try to create a new field of battle in the West Bank and Gaza, one can imagine the expulsion of Arabs just as the Jews were expelled by the Romans from the same territories about 2,000 years ago. However, with a change of strategy, the Palestinians can turn a military defeat into a political victory. The Israel-PLO war of 1982 might prove to be one of the most important turning points in Israel's history for reasons quite different than the immediate objectives of the war.